

## Cold Exposes Afghanistan's Broken Promises Us

The winter weather death toll in Afghanistan has exposed the country's acute lack of infrastructure, writes journalist Ahmed Rashid in his latest guest column for the BBC News website.

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By Ahmed Rashid

More than 600 people, many of them children, have died in a prolonged bout of bad winter weather in Afghanistan that has included unprecedented snowfall, heavy rain and below freezing temperatures.

In some eastern provinces ravenous wolves have been attacking equally hungry children.

The United Nations is just short of declaring "a humanitarian crisis" for Afghanistan.

Yet the deaths and suffering and last month's air crash near Kabul are as much to do with the still chronically slow progress in rebuilding the country's destroyed infrastructure as the weather.

**Despite years of promises to rebuild Afghanistan, the international community is still failing to do so**

With no roads or other communications it has taken more than a month for aid workers or Western military units to reach some snowbound villages in western and north-eastern Afghanistan, where the majority of deaths have occurred.

Afghans are still paying with their lives for the failure of the international community to fulfil its many promises to help rebuild the country.

### Flood warning

There has been no lack of response to the foul weather affecting 14 of the country's 34 provinces.

More than 400,000 people have received food and other aid from the Afghan government, US-led coalition forces, Nato peacekeeping forces, UN agencies and Afghan and Western non-governmental organisations.

But they face the problem of how to get to them when snowfall has blocked mountain passes, avalanches have cut off villages, the few dirt track roads are impassable and there are no telephones to warn of impending disasters.

Even in Kabul's premier Indira Gandhi hospital, children in incubators and on respirators live or die depending on whether there are power cuts to the hospital.

Heating is non-existent and at times the temperature in the hospital has dropped to minus 10 degrees Celsius.

Many of the districts have no functioning hospitals and local clinics are devoid of medicines.

Now, in the first week of March, the World Food Programme has warned of unprecedented floods as the snow melts in the spring.

Nearly three and half years after the war that defeated the Taleban and despite the remarkable political progress Afghanistan has made, the lack of infrastructure continues to haunt this country.

New roads, power stations, water supplies and investment in agriculture which the majority of the population depend on, are still missing.

Only one section - Kabul to Kandahar - of the national highway programme has been completed.

No new power station has been built and only an estimated 6% of Afghans receive any regular electricity.

The lack of clean drinking water, especially after six years of drought, causes disease and early death.

What else has been done to rebuild the infrastructure has been patchwork at best - a generator here, a water tap there or a bulldozer flattening a dirt track road.

The Kam Air crash last month that killed 104 passengers and crew on a flight from Herat to Kabul was only partially a result of bad weather.

Kabul airport has no radar and there is no up-to-standard modern airport in the country, even though thousands of Western military aircraft safely land at their military bases in Afghanistan every year.

Afghanistan needs new airports as much as it needs tarred roads.

### **Pledges**

The money is there but the projects are not, due to bureaucratic bottlenecks that paralyse major aid donors such as the European Union, the US and the World Bank.

The international community pledged \$13.4bn at the Tokyo and Berlin reconstruction conferences for the five years starting December 2001.

This despite a needs assessment by the Afghan government of \$27bn.

Yet, according to the Centre on International Cooperation at New York University, until last month only \$3.9bn had been given out for reconstruction projects.

Of that only \$900m worth of projects has actually been completed.

In comparison Iraq is receiving many times what Afghanistan is getting in funds for reconstruction.

The kind of effort the US-led coalition has put into rebuilding the power grid in Baghdad has never been seen in Kabul.

### **Sense of pessimism**

In the meantime the lack of investment in Afghan agriculture has led to farmers growing opium poppies, which has led to drugs generating as much as \$6.8bn in income between 2002 and 2004.

Drugs now account for 60% of the economy, but you cannot blame the farmers when they have nothing else to turn to in order to feed their families.

"Our team found the overwhelming majority of people hold a sense of pessimism and fear that reconstruction is bypassing them," says Daud Saba, one of the authors of a new UN Development Programme (UNDP) report on Afghanistan.

The report ranks the country 173 out of 178 countries in development indices.

There has been rapid progress in many fields such as health and education and five million children have gone back to school.

Yet the UNDP report states Afghanistan still has "the worst education system in the world" and it is the world

leader in infant deaths, while one woman dies in pregnancy every 30 minutes.

Life expectancy for Afghans is still only 44 years - that is 20 years less than any of its neighbours.

Nothing can restore Afghanistan's political unity, social viability and provide self-sustaining economic development until it has acquired at least that minimum basic infrastructure that was present in 1979 before the Soviet invasion.

Foreign donors need to take up whole projects like building new power stations and roads, cutting through their own and the Afghan government's red tape and building in a hurry.

They need to put their money where their mouth is, stop promising reconstruction and actually start delivering on it.

Without this a rain or snowstorm - normal events for a people who have lived with extremes of weather for centuries - will continue to extract the lives of Afghan children and feed hungry wolves.